

MAY 19, 2008

Parashat B'chukotai

Opening Our Eyes to the Truth

Im b'chukotai teileichu – “If you walk in my statutes” (Leviticus 26:3)

Parashat B'chukotai is mostly known for the *tochechah* (rebuke), which describes the brutal punishments for the Jewish people should they abandon the Torah. However, before any curses, the *parashah* first outlines the blessings that await the nation which fulfills the dictates of the Torah. Strangely, while the Torah needs just ten verses to outline the benefits of adherence to God's commands, the rebuke itself requires more than thirty verses. Such a disparity between the blessings and curses is clearly meant to teach a lesson. Is the Torah claiming that the punishment for misbehavior is truly worse than the reward for observance? Ibn Ezra (on 26:13) answers with an emphatic “no.” But, his reason for the discrepancy teaches us a critical lesson about seeing reality for what it is. He tells us, “and those of empty minds said that the curses are greater than the blessings, and they did not tell the truth. Rather, the blessings were said in general and the curses [more] specifically to cause fear and dread in the listener.”

Thus the Torah teaches us an important lesson about human nature. In general we tend to be optimistic and envision a future of promise. We readily accept the blessings of the Torah outlined at the outset of our *parashah* and tend to focus on that sense of hope. Unfortunately that optimism can also lead us to ignore dire realities lying right before our eyes in the delusion that our worst fears will never materialize.

We now find ourselves in great danger of making this mistake in the Middle East. Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad continues to spew anti-Israel rhetoric while attempting to develop the capacity to actualize his incitements to genocide. As recently as May 14th he proclaimed, “They (Israel) should know that regional nations hate this fake and criminal regime and if the smallest and briefest chance is given to regional nations they will destroy (it).” This rhetoric is made even more dangerous when taken in conjunction with this month's earlier announcement that Iran has dramatically increased its capacity to enrich uranium - the key step towards developing nuclear weapons. Beyond triggering a nuclear arms race in the world's most dangerous and unstable region this pursuit also poses a direct threat both to Israel's long-term security and U.S. national security interests.

We must continue to remind our communities and our elected officials of the urgent need to rein in Iran's nuclear program. As Ibn Ezra teaches us, as much as we'd like to imagine that our fears will not come true we need to open our eyes to the truth and take action to ensure that our worst fears never come to pass. ■

Standing Tall

Va'olech etchem kommemyut – “And I shall lead you upright” (Leviticus 26:10)

The phrase, “walking tall with God” can be traced from the Bible to classical Jewish prayer and all the way to modern prayer today. In the *Ahava Rabbah* prayer recited before the *Shema*, we ask God, *ve'tolichenu kommemyut l'artzenu* (and guide us standing straight to our Land). What does it mean when God guarantees us that he will “lead us

standing upright?" In the Midrash we find two basic interpretations. Onkelos (on 26:13) interprets *komemiyut* to mean "and I will speak to you (i.e. grant you) freedom." Freedom therefore represents elevating people by giving them a sense of independence and self-determination. The Midrash in Bereishit Rabbah (12:6) sees an even greater promise in God's blessing explaining that *komemiyut* means, *bekomah zekufah* (at full posture), signifying that God will lead His people as they stand tall. Not only will we have our independence but we will also have the self-confidence and Jewish identity to stand tall among the nations of the world without any fear or sense of intimidation.

Today we witness both interpretations of this great blessing. Sixty years ago we were blessed with Jewish national independence. Since that event, and perhaps because of it, our sense of Jewish identity and pride has given us the strength and self-assurance to assert ourselves both as Jews and as Americans, with the rights, but also the obligations that this implies.

Next week pro-Israel activists from around the country will begin descending on Washington, D.C. for three of the most important days affecting Israel's future - AIPAC's annual Policy Conference. This conference attracts more than 6500 community leaders and student activists from all 50 states, and more than half of the U.S. Senate, a third of the House of Representatives and countless Israeli and American policymakers and thought leaders. With a wide range of topics covering nearly every aspect of the U.S.-Israel relationship this conference is a powerful example of how, as a community, our confidence in our identity allows us to stand tall in rejecting those who would see Israel destroyed.

The ability of AIPAC to support the U.S.-Israel relationship depends on our willingness to take advantage of the blessings of "*komemiyut*" and stand tall as Americans in support of Israel. ■

A Curse and a Blessing: A Lesson for Today

Ve'etchem ezrah ba'goyim – “And you will I will scatter among the nations” (Leviticus 26:33)

When is a curse really a blessing? In our *parashah* the Torah tells us during the *tochechah* (rebuke) that if the Jewish people abandon God, "I will destroy the Land" (26:32) and continues in the next verse, "and you I will scatter among the nations." The Midrash Lekach Tov notes that, "for the benefit of Israel they were spread among the nations. For, if they were gathered [in one place], the nations of the world might wage war with them...and because they are scattered they are not destroyed."

We saw the great truth of this Midrash during the fires of the Holocaust, as Hitler's final solution lay confined to the borders of the Nazi empire. Imagine if Hitler's reach had extended to Russia or even America? Yet, this curse (and blessing), is precisely what leaves Jews feeling so vulnerable and exposed today.

For the first time since the destruction of the Second Temple, in the year 70 CE, the largest Jewish community in the world resides in Israel and as such the Jewish nation faces its greatest threat in two thousand years. The enemies of Israel make no effort to hide their desire to destroy the Jewish State completely. Hamas leader Mahmoud Zahar recently boasted that Hamas has 200,000 suicide bombers ready to attack Israel. The attacks of the past few weeks on Ashkelon and Sderot have had a devastating impact resulting in multiple deaths and the destruction of any semblance of a normal life for residents of these communities. With more than 4,000 rockets being fired from Gaza in the last three years and now new rockets and missiles with longer ranges inflicting greater damage it is clear that the situation in Southern Israel is becoming more dire. Despite these daily attacks Israel continues to show greater concern for the Gazans than Hamas, allowing nearly 20,000 trucks through the border crossings and delivering half-a-million tons of goods including some 30 million gallons of fuel since the Hamas takeover of Gaza.

Because we no longer have the assurance of the curse/blessing of being scattered among the nations Hamas must be stopped before they have the capability to attack even larger cities than those already in her range. If Hamas succeeds in her goals it would truly be a curse with no blessing hidden inside. ■

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